

THE CALL
OF THE
COUNTRY PARISH

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The country-side is calling, calling for men. Vexing problems of labor and of life disturb our minds in country as in city. The workers of the land are striving to make a better use of their resources of soil and climate, and are seeking both larger wealth and a higher welfare. But the striving and the seeking raise new questions of great public concern. Social institutions have developed to meet these new issues. But the great need of the present is leadership. Only men can vitalize institutions. We need leaders among the farmers themselves, we need leaders in education, leaders in organization and co-operation. So the country church is calling for men of God to go forth to war against all the powers of evil that prey upon the hearts of the men who live upon the

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land, as well as upon the people in palace and tenement.

The country church wants men of vision, who see through the incidental, the small, the transient, to the fundamental, the large, the abiding issues that the countryman must face and conquer.

She wants practical men, who seek the mountain top by the obscure and steep paths of daily toil and real living, men who can bring things to pass, secure tangible results.

She wants original men, who can enter a human field poorly tilled, much grown to brush, some of it of diminished fertility, and by new methods can again secure a harvest that will gladden the heart of the great Husbandman.

She wants aggressive men, who do not hesitate to break with tradition, who fear God more than prejudice, who regard institutions as but a means to an end, who grow frequent crops of new ideas and dare to winnow them with the flails of practical trial.

She wants trained men, who come to their work with knowledge and with power, who have thought long and

deeply upon the problems of rural life, who have hammered out a plan for an active campaign for the rural church.

She wants men with enthusiasms, whose energy can withstand the frosts of sloth, of habit, of pettiness, of envy, of back-biting, and whose spirit is not quenched by the waters of adversity, of unrealized hopes, of tottering schemes.

She wants persistent men, who will stand by their task amid the mysterious calls from undiscovered lands, the siren voices of ambition and ease, the withering storms of winters of discontent.

She wants constructive men, who can transmute visions into wood and stone, dreams into live institutions, hopes into fruitage.

She wants heroic men, men who possess a "tart, cathartic virtue," men who love adventure and difficulty, men who can work alone with God and suffer no sense of loneliness.

THE APPEALS FROM THE RURAL PARISH

This call from the country parish is one that may well give pause to men who

seek to serve their country and mankind. There are numerous and powerful appeals coming up from the tillers of the soil, to those still undecided as to the life task. Let us name some of these appeals:

There is the abiding significance of the great problem of agriculture and country life. The hungry nations are to be fed, the world's nakedness is to be clothed, God-given fertility is to be conserved. The forces of nature are to be harnessed by science and driven by trained skill. A fundamental human industry is to be fostered, an industry that supports gigantic railways, huge manufactures, immense commercial enterprises, stupendous financial operations. Scores of millions of American citizens are to be educated for life's work, their political intelligence and integrity are to be developed, their conditions of living are to be improved, their virtue is to be guarded, their ideals are to be enlarged. These people are to be served by state and school, by the power of co-operative enterprise, by church and the ministers of the Christian

faith. They are to continue to send choice youth to the cities for replenishment and for leadership. These millions are to retain a place in advancing American life consistent with our traditions and our hopes.

The need of the church in all these great enterprises of rural society constitutes an appeal. Useless the wealth wrung from the soil unless the welfare of the soil worker be maintained. Valueless the material elements of human life unless the human spirit be enlarged. But vanity and vexation of heart are our farm labors and plans unless the spirit of service and of brotherhood is to dominate. And shall we partake of God's bounty without rendering to him our fealty? Shall the guardians of an ancient faith permit the Saracens of materialism, of worldliness, of love of money, of adoration of power, to capture the citadels of worship, and of praise, and of loving loyalty to all that is divine and eternal? These issues are real and they are vital. Let no pressure of appeal from city slum, from lumber camp or mining village, from immi-

grants' need, from bleeding, impoverished Armenia, from the newly pulsing China, or from the islands of the sea—heart-wringing and burning as these calls may be—let none of these things blind us to the slow-moving but irresistible tides of human life that ebb and flow in the homes and institutions of our American farm people.

The charms of the pastor's life in the open country constitute a call. For this cause many are called and few are chosen. But for that man who loves the open, whose heart responds to the soft music of meadow and field, whose ear is attuned to the rhythm of the seasons, who feels the romance of intelligent care of soil and plant and animal—to that man the rural parish offers rewards beyond all price.

Dear uplands, Chester's favorable fields,
My large unjealous loves, many yet one—
A grave good-morrow to your Graces, all,
Fair tilth and fruitful seasons!

Lo, how still!

The midmorn empties you of men, save me;
Speak to your lover, meadows! None can
hear.

I lie as lies yon placid Brandywine,
Holding the hills and heavens in my heart
For contemplation.

—SIDNEY LANIER.

The opportunities offered by the country parish for breadth of culture constitute a call not usually put down in the list of reasons for being a country clergyman. One does not need constant access to great libraries in order to acquire culture. Culture is appreciation of environment. It is a process of soul-ripening. Knowledge is merely the crude material upon which culture works. Reading is only one door by which culture enters. Close observation, meditation, pondering in the heart, much thinking are the favorite tools of culture. Do you desire time to read in peace? Do you wish for a chance to weigh and meditate? Do you like to stand close to men at work? Do you want to know the secret places of the Most High? Do you gain wisdom from the sermons preached by the rocks, joy from the songs of little rivers, peace from the evening hymns that arise from meadow and woodland? Then do not hesitate to seek these things in the coun-

try parish. From your rural watch-tower you, also, may observe the swift march of affairs, keep alive to great movements, see the drift of great human tides. You may in the country, also, learn to appreciate the physical and spiritual environment that makes for the welfare of men and women, secure real personal growth, develop sound culture.

It is worth one's while to be in touch with leaders of thought and action. The stimulus that comes to the pastor of a large city church from such associations is real and vital. But for the man who can detect life's veneer, who loves to examine the fiber of character, who knows human nature, the country parish offers ample chance for interest and profit. For, commonly, rural people are natural, their native instincts are strong, their tastes are simple, their speech is direct. To him who likes this sort of human contact the country parish calls.

The very presence of the difficulties in country church work formulates a distinct call to men who like to conquer circumstances. The problem of prosperous church life in rural communities is not

an easy problem. The successful minister in those communities cannot enjoy a life of ease. Vexation of spirit may become his portion. But the joy of overcoming an untoward situation may also be his. Some men will be attracted to the country parish just because it is a hard field.

The dearth of men constitutes a call. The fields are white for the harvest. Many laborers present themselves. But some of them come out merely for a summer's practice. Some have ancient implements. Some do not know wheat from corn. Relatively few deliberately mean to make these open fields their life scene, and fewer still have prepared themselves to harvest the crop by modern methods. Do not some of you see, therefore, a rare chance for distinction? A prayer for well-equipped harvesters is going up from all our country-side, and we wait impatiently for the response, "Here am I, send me."

To those men who have the pioneer spirit there comes a strong appeal from the rural church. For here is a chance for unique work, something different,

and yet supremely useful as well as rare. Who will be our explorers, to blaze new trails by which other men may find fresh fields of influence for advancing the kingdom? Nowhere more fully than in the country can a clergyman shepherd his flock by day and by night, know the quality of their meadows, guard their water courses, lead into new and sweet pastures. The splendid opportunities for leadership in the country parish ought to ring in the hearts of young men of power.

The timeliness of a redirected country church work constitutes an appeal. There are large stirrings in all rural affairs. The fields are alive with movements for better farming, for more useful education, for co-operation. As never before, the country minister has efficient allies. The mechanism of socialization is busy; the institutions of agricultural education are pulsing with life; organizations are multiplying in number and in power. And the church at large is stirring. She realizes the herculean task before her. She sees the signs of moral unrest. She observes that the notes of

idealism are betimes deadened by the "wearisome sound of the scythe of time and the trowel of trade." The man who goes to the country parish is captain in the host of a growing army that seeks to command the country-side, as well as to capture cities.

The final and the supreme call from the country parish comes out of the abiding hunger of men and women for religion—religion interpreted in terms of daily toil, common human need, social evolution, justice, and fraternity. In country as well as in city, many men and many women are engaged—often unwittingly or even unwillingly engaged—in the sad business of living outside the pale of religious idealism, seeking to explain life on grounds of expediency, trying to find easy delight for the senses, expending toil and enduring sweat for that which is not bread. But all of them know, in their best moments, that underneath are the Everlasting Arms. Can we, then, afford to neglect half of our countrymen in our efforts to reach men effectively with the new evangel? Shall all these rising tides of life in our rural

regions be left to break upon the futile shores of economic gain and personal pleasure? Is it a small and mean task to maintain and enlarge in the country both individual and community ideals, under the inspiration and guidance of the religious motive, and to help forty millions of rural people to incarnate those ideals in personal and family life, in industrial effort and political development, and in all social relationships?

A GREAT COUNTRY MINISTER

In all the days of the church men have been found who illustrated in their own lives the opportunities that lie before the clergyman in the country parish. At this moment there are men, in all parts of our own land, who see this new call of the country parish and are responding intelligently and gallantly. But one name gives us entrance into such a wealth of inspiration and suggestion that we must pause to review the work and method of the man. You doubtless know the story full well, but it may not be omitted here.

About the middle of the eighteenth century, John Frederick Oberlin, Bachelor of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy of a great university, masterful student and courageous leader, declared that he did "not wish to labor in some comfortable pastoral charge," where he could be at ease; but the question is, "Where can I be most useful?" God answered his prayer, and at the age of twenty-seven this man, who might have had a powerful church in a great center, entered upon his life task, under the most forbidding conditions, in the Ban-de-la-Roche, among the "blue Alsatian mountains." It was a region with

six months of winter; at times the cold of the shores of the Baltic; a wind like ice sometimes comes down from the mountain tops . . . ; the sick and dying are to be visited in remote, wild, solitary places among the forests.

This little parish, set high in the rugged Vosges, consisted of not over one hundred families at the time Oberlin came to it. The region had for centuries been the football of war, its fields had been harried, its manhood drained for martial conflict.

In all this time it had been a battle for sheer existence. In the short summer season the people gathered barely enough food to sustain their impoverished life through the long winter, only to renew the struggle when the snows melted. With no trades and without industries other than the rudest agriculture, and with no intelligent cultivation of the soil for this, their roads mere by-paths, their streams without bridges, their food scanty and coarse, what could be looked for but hopeless and hapless lives?*

The people were taxed far beyond their power to pay. Their poverty was beyond description. They were practically slaves. They had no schools, and were ignorant to a degree. Physical misery and moral degradation were wedded.

Note the picture of the same parish a half-century later, near the close of this historic pastorate. The hills and valleys of the Ban-de-la-Roche had become fertile and fruitful. Everywhere there were evidences of a prosperous agriculture. Every acre was well tilled. Each

* For the facts of Oberlin's life and the quotations here given the author is indebted to Professor A. F. Beard of Oberlin College, who in his recent "Story of John Frederick Oberlin" has written a book that should be read and pondered by every country clergyman in America.

homestead had its orchards and flower gardens. Splendid mountain roads and substantial bridges gave access to the great world beyond the hills. Schools flourished, schools in which the pedagogy of Pestalozzi and Froebel was antedated; schools in which were taught nature study, agriculture, civics, æsthetics. A local improvement society concerned itself with developing the beauty about home and farmstead. An agricultural club flourished. A well-ordered system of irrigation had been installed. Peace and plenty reigned supreme. Thrift marked the labors and savings, intelligence directed the industry of all. Simple but charming houses covered a beautiful family life. Religion served to bind men and women to their fellows and to their God.

The recognized genius in all this transformation was Pastor Oberlin. In Oberlin's closing years, the king of France conferred upon him the medal of the Legion of Honor, for his many efforts which had resulted in making the district "flourishing and happy." The National Agricultural Society decreed him a gold

medal for "prodigies accomplished in silence in this almost unknown corner of the Vosges, . . . in a district before his arrival almost savage," and into which he had brought "the best methods of agriculture and the purest lights of civilization." An English lady, visiting the region in 1820, writes: "The poor charm me. I have never met with any like them; so much humility, spirituality, and with manners that would do honor to a court." It was all Oberlin's work.

By what miracle was this transformation wrought? By preaching? Yes; Oberlin never failed to prepare his sermons with the greatest care. He was a reader of science, of history, of philosophy. Even in his mountain eyrie he kept in touch with the world's thought. But was it by reading, and study, and faithful preaching alone that the change came? Listen!

Oberlin secured the first schoolhouse by promising that it should cost the people nothing. As a matter of fact, he paid a substantial share of the cost of two schoolhouses out of the savings of a salary of \$200 a year. He shouldered a

pick and led the work of building the first highway and bridging the mountain stream. He proved that horticulture was practicable in the region by himself planting successful orchards. He introduced new varieties and new crops. He organized societies and clubs. He taught manners and morals. He planned and directed the school work in every detail. In the beginning all of these efforts were opposed most vigorously. Some even tried to intimidate him. He carried every reform against severe opposition. He helped the people in spite of themselves. But in all his efforts he kept the religious element to the fore. All things were to be done for God as well as for oneself. He himself, while practical in the extreme, was also spiritual to the verge of mysticism.

Rural parishes in America that present the woeful conditions of the Ban-de-la-Roche in 1767 may not be common, though of that let us not be too sure. The same underground work that Oberlin did may not need doing by every rural clergyman. Schools are busy in every parish. Forces of socialization

and co-operation are at work. The means of agricultural training are at hand. Yet the underlying philosophy of Oberlin's life work must be the fundamental principle of the great country parish work of the future. Oberlin believed in the unity of life, the marriage of labor and living. He knew that social justice, intelligent toil, happy environment are bound up with the growth of the spirit. They act and react upon one another.

More than a century ago, in an obscure parish among the mountains of Alsatia a great man labored for a lifetime as a country minister. He knew all the souls in his charge to their core. He loved them passionately. He refused to leave them for greater reward and easier work. He loved their fields and their mountains. He studied their problems. He toiled for his people incessantly. He transformed their industry and he regenerated their lives. He built a new and permanent rural civilization that endures to this day unspoiled. The parishes about the little village of Waldersbach, nestled among the Vosges Mountains,

thus became a laboratory in which the call of the country parish met a deep answer of success and of peace.

A PRESENT CRISIS

There is a new interest in American country life. The love of the out-of-doors is growing. Business men are recognizing afresh the fundamental economic character of the agricultural industry. The solidarity of city and country is seen concretely. The unity of national life is found to consist in developing both urban and rural civilization. Great movements are under way, designed to increase the yield of the soil, to put agriculture on a better business basis, to educate rural youth, to secure co-operative effort among farmers. Is the church also astir in rural places? The country church has been a saving salt in the development of our great farming areas; is she alive today to these new movements? Is she leading in the campaign for rural progress?

The most ardent friend of the country church must give a sorrowful "No"

in reply to these questions. While many individual churches are doing splendid work, the country church as an institution is not awake to her task. She has not realized that wonderful changes are taking place. Science applied to farming is working a revolution in rural life as well as in rural industry. We are entering upon a new era in American agricultural history. But unless the church arouses herself, her peculiar work among country folk will not be done.

The present situation then is nothing less than critical. It is vital that the new country life movements be given a religious content. The leadership of the country church is imperative, if the new streams are to flow in the channels of idealism. Let the church assert its leadership at once. Let it set the pace for rural progress and determine its great issues. There is no time to be lost. The floods are rising. The day is at hand.

WHAT SHALL BE DONE

What shall we do to arouse the country church, to give it its rightful place

among the forces at work for solving the rural problem?

We must ask men to consecrate themselves to life-long service in the country parish. The country church needs men who believe that here is a great task, worthy of high devotion, thorough preparation, intelligent study, patient continuance in well-doing.

We must root out the idea that only inferior men can find a permanent work in the country parish. It needs our strongest and best men, particularly in these critical, formative days of a new program for the country church. The issues at stake merit the leadership of great men. Let us do away with even the secret thought that a brilliant theologian has "buried himself" in some obscure farming community. It is his own fault if he remain buried. The seeds of the new rural religious life may be sown in corruption, in dishonor, in weakness; but, please God, they shall bear fruit in incorruption, in glory, and in power. We have a right to ask strong men to put their hands to this plow and not to turn back.

We must go out to the men now toiling in the rural parishes, with a message of cheer, of co-operation, of encouragement. They are a noble band. They need our aid. Let us help them to grip the new sources of power, to assume a new leadership, to work together for larger ends.

We must appeal to the seminaries, and other training schools for preachers, to send forth men who have formed a well-grounded ambition to explore the resources of this great field and who have qualified themselves for the task—who are well armored for the campaign.

We must go to the colleges, and appeal to strong young men who want hard places, who love to take chances, who have withal the desire to serve their fellows mightily. We must persuade them that here is work that is epoch-making, a man's work, work worth while.

We must appeal to the heroic in young men. Let us not try to show that the country parish is a garden of delight, a place of rest and ease. Rather let its difficulties and puzzling problems con-

stitute a clarion-call to the men of heroic mold. Our fathers met every hard issue in the heroic spirit. They dared the wilds of an unexplored continent to establish a new kingdom of God. They carried the banner of the church across sea and land and planted it among savages. They kept the church in the van of the army of conquest that has subdued our western forest and prairie. Have their sons poorer vision, smaller courage, weaker wills? We may not believe it. But we must show them that here is really a man's work, that something vital is at stake. We must appeal to high motives, expect large sacrifices.

The critical need just now is for a few strong men of large power to get hold of this country church question in a virile way. It is the time for leadership. We need a score of Oberlins to point the way by actually working out the problem on the field. It is well enough to discuss the problem in its theoretical aspects. It is desirable to organize large movements on behalf of the rural church. But more than all else just now, we need a few men to achieve great results in

the rural parish, to re-establish the leadership of the church. No organization can do it. No layman can do it. No educational institution can do it. A preacher must do it—do it in spite of small salary, isolation, conservatism, restricted field, overchurching, or any other devil that shows its face. The call is imperative. Shall we be denied the men?

While we must demand men, single-handed and alone, to meet this call of the country parish, there are two powerful allies that we may ask to our aid. There is always stimulus in a common purpose. Is not the time ripe for a new "rural band"—a group of half a dozen men from the seminary, who find adjacent parishes in a rural region, and there, quietly, co-operatively, persistently, grimly, study the situation, take leadership in all community life, incite the aid of school and Grange, stir lay support, carry on a great campaign for better individual and community life, and do all under the inspiration and guidance of the religious motive? A plan of this sort, carefully considered, discreetly

managed, patiently developed, would form the nucleus for a new country church. It needs doing. It can be done. Are there men who will do it?

The time is ripe also for an organized movement on behalf of the country parish, that shall give dignity and direction to the efforts of solitary workers. The country parish is a peculiar field. New methods are needed. Men must be aroused from lethargy. A powerful co-operative enterprise must set standards, educate men, co-ordinate effort.

The country church is indeed calling for men. The prosperous churches in rich farming regions need strong leaders to direct the forces of progress and to lead men to the waters of life. The little white meeting-house on the abandoned New England hillside holds out its arms in mute appeal for men to bring new life. From the cotton fields and mountains of the Southland, from the prairies of the central valleys, from the transformed deserts of the West, comes this call for men to serve the country parish.

Let not our eyes be blind to these deep needs of our rural life, nor our ears deaf

to the call of the country parish. The time for a great work is at hand. The country church is facing a "present crisis"; therefore let us remember that

New occasions teach new duties; Time
makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still, and onward,
who would keep abreast of Truth;
Lo, before us gleam her camp-fires! We
ourselves must Pilgrims be,
Launch our Mayflower, and steer boldly
through the desperate winter sea,
Nor attempt the Future's portal with
the Past's blood-rusted key.

up
ps us



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